

Approaches to the teaching and learning of English as an additional language in early years settings

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The author is by background and training an early years professional with experience of teaching in primary, further, and higher education. After initial teacher training she left education and worked in housing management for ten years until the arrival of twins. Spending the next five years at home with her own children impressed on her the value and importance of those early formative years; consequently she returned to work in primary education, specifically to work in early years. It was during her time here that the need for highly qualified and experienced early years staff became apparent and initiated her move into FE, and later into HE. She currently holds a post as a senior lecturer in early years.

Abstract

The work investigates the approaches to the teaching and learning of English as an additional language in primary education, and, identifies the most appropriate and effective means of achieving this. Appreciating that the ethnic diversity within individual schools may result in a varying range of strategies, the objective was to identify a consistency of approach. Additionally there is an examination of the role of learner support in classrooms, and the strategies employed by schools to develop effective communication with parents. The study is longitudinal in design and tracks a cohort of children from reception to year 2. Data collection draws on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative paradigms and combines observations of children and staff, interviews with staff and, focus groups with parents. Alongside, are assessments of children, a review of records and policy documents, and an analysis of guidance and literacy strategies. The catalyst for the study came from comments made by practitioners, that parents from different ethnic backgrounds held differing views about how their children should be taught English as an additional language. Added to this, the researcher had observed the increasing numbers of children in local schools from differing language groups, and the concerns expressed by staff about the best way to tackle what at times seemed to be, an overwhelming problem in everyday practice. The one clear aim throughout the study was to throw useful light on effective teaching. Indeed, Evans (2002, p.228) raise the questions, 'What use is educational research if it does not inform and impact upon what goes on in schools?'

Key words

Classroom support, Creative teaching strategies, Developing positive parental relationships, English as an additional language, English language skills, Early literacy

ACRONYMNS

BLA – bi-lingual assistant
EAL – English as an additional language
EYFS – Early Years Foundation Stage
L1 – first language
L2 – second language
TA – teaching assistant

Background and introduction

Increasing numbers of children are entering education with little or no ability to speak English. Since this is the language for both education and assessment, this raises important questions in terms of children's attainment and achievement. In 2006, the Department for Education and Skills identified that 21.9% of UK children were from ethnic minority backgrounds and did not have English as a first language; this figure is projected to rise nationally to 23% by 2018.

The longitudinal study conducted from September 2008 to July 2011, set out to investigate the teaching and learning of English as an additional language by following a cohort of children, from reception to the end of year 2. The sample group in the study included a cohort of 150 children aged 5 to 7 years, drawn from 5 primary schools from differing socio-economic backgrounds (see table 1, page 13). Children were observed in the classroom environment and progress was identified initially against the Early Learning Goals for Communication, Language and Literacy from the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum (DfES, 2008) followed later by The National Curriculum (DfEE, 1999) requirements for English at KS1. 15 teaching staff were observed in their normal classroom environment during literacy sessions. Interactions and interpersonal communications between staff (teachers and teaching assistant) and children, children and peers were recorded; and in order to represent the parent's voice, focus groups were established with 60 parents participating.

Results and findings from EYFS

The emphasis in all settings was on social and personal development with children actively encouraged to respond in English. This ability to express personal feelings and understand those of others is important as children develop. Weare (2004,) refers to this as emotional literacy. The main approach adopted by all staff was identified as a dialogic style, which is based around the concept (Alexander, 2008) that high quality talk enhances children's all round development.

In all settings literacy underpinned the entire curriculum whilst also having specific slots throughout the day. During such sessions the emphasis was on every child becoming a confident speaker, in recognition that this is the first and most important step in gaining literacy skills (DfES, 2009).

Staff, both teachers and assistants worked and planned co-operatively to ensure that children met age-appropriate outcomes. There was a huge emphasis on free play and child-initiated activity, which recognises that cognitive and social development are complimentary. The relationship between play-based pedagogy and high quality provision are significantly effective where there is a high level of interaction between children and practitioners (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2001). This was clearly observed in all settings. There was a strong emphasis in all settings on the use of song and music and a clear recognition from all staff that this is a positive means for children to learn language in a way that is enjoyable, repetitive and reinforcing (Booth Church, 2006). It is therefore, of particular use in supporting language acquisition and development for second language children (Huy Le, 1999). All settings were laid out in large open plan spaces with areas of learning identified by words in English, pictures, and symbols. Children were however, allowed to freely use and move equipment across these areas (McNaughton and Williams, 2009). Discussion between staff, about changing and placing materials and resources was on-going in nature and suggested a flexible and responsive approach to planning (Curtis and Carter, 2005). Resources, displays and artefacts in all settings were reflective of a multi-cultural perspective, though did not necessarily reflect the cultures of those children present.

Early years practitioners mindful of the intensity of daily interactions with young children, were observed to be pro-active in establishing constructive and supportive relationships. There was a strong emphasis on guided participation with staff working alongside children in their learning (Rogoff, 2003). In relation to the interaction between children, it was observed that where L2 children were in the majority the tendency was for children to communicate in L1, since there may be no perceived need to do so in L2. However, where there was a greater balance between numbers of L1 and L2 children there was a greater tendency for L2 children to use English for communication. Since children at this age are developing socially and emotionally and beginning to understand

about friendship they may therefore be motivated to use L2 in order to develop such friendships (Smith, 2010).

Whilst it was apparent that the play-based approach to learning of the EYFS was practiced in all settings, the results (see table 2, page 14) for schools 4 and 5 at the end of reception year are lower than the other three. The main differences being the percentages of EAL children, with schools 4 and 5 being exclusively EAL, and the corresponding levels of parental literacy skills with again, schools 4 and 5 having a high percentage of parents who themselves have little English and low levels of educational attainment. In general, the home languages represented here are predominantly oral, with few parents able to read/write; children are therefore only subject to an oral pattern of speech and do not have the opportunity to establish a range of language skills that incorporates an awareness of how those sounds look, and are formed. In terms of Bruner's approach to language development (Bruner, 1983) they may appear to be lacking the iconic and symbolic stages until they encounter formal education.

Kabuto (2011), regards children to use three languages; for instruction, in the community, and in the home. It is clear that in these two schools, the language of the home and community are not that used for instruction, which may offer some explanation for the difference in results. With reference to such 'ethnic enclaves' Massey (1999) and Per-Andrews et al (2003) discuss high levels of self-sufficiency and latency in learning the host language, which, whilst enabling members to function well within the community can also be a hindrance to social involvement in the mainstream of society. This may be one of the underlying reasons for the apparent reluctance to progress into English language speaking.

Children make sense of the world through their active engagement with it, and develop a socio-cultural perspective on language through interaction with their peers (Gee, 2002). It must therefore be highlighted that in schools 4 and 5, children do not have the opportunity to actively engage with English speaking peers from differing backgrounds, but rather, continue with those from the home, and community who are also EAL. There is therefore no natural opportunity for children to learn their English language skills directly through interaction with peers. It is clear that all settings make good considerations for the children in terms of developmental needs, for the individual and, with regards to what is also culturally appropriate (Gonzalez-Mena, 1998). Likewise, is their common intention to working positively with parents, however, this is made more difficult for staff in those settings where a translator must be relied on for communication. This may be an indication that in settings such as schools 4 and 5, a different approach to working with parents is required. This could ensure that a greater level of co-operation from parents is fostered, in order to establish a base for language that supports the transition of children into education.

Results and findings at the end of KS I

In all schools the teaching style moved progressively towards a more formalised and directive approach, although some elements of the play-based learning of the EYFS remain incorporated into literacy e.g. the use of resources. Literacy now took the form of a dedicated session with very clear learning objectives set; this was generally an overarching theme which became incorporated into other aspects of the curriculum throughout the day/week. What was also clear was the extent to which teachers experimented with creative ideas e.g. structured learning/role play areas, writing back-packs, dens and secret writing spaces, talking tables, hot-seating, the talking shop, and the '5-minute box'. Children were encouraged to develop literacy beyond the traditional means of reading and writing, with staff clearly recognising and valuing a multi-sensory approach to learning. What still remained evident was the dialogic approach of Alexander (2008), with teachers recognising that high quality talk not only enhances children's learning holistically, but more so where the development of language itself is concerned.

In all schools it was the teacher who took responsibility for supporting L2 learners, through daily planning, by building relationships, through personalised learning, and by having a clear commitment to spend time throughout each week with every child. Additional support was provided by TAs working within the planned framework, and by again adopting the same personal approach as the teacher. In those settings where the cohort consisted of both L1 and L2 learners there were opportunities for peer learning to occur, and it was

clear this happened not just through natural socialisation, but also, because teachers took advantage of this means of learning and allowed time for it to happen. Although settings employed BLAs they did not support all L2 children, in the study only those languages from south east Asia were provided for; those L2 children from other language communities had no such support. Thus, in those settings where cohorts were made up entirely of L2 children speaking Asian languages, the role of the BLA was to translate and interpret between teacher and child. The role of adult learner support for L2 children appears therefore to be inconsistent, and might suggest that some children are being disadvantaged by a lack of support in the home language. The results (see table 3, page 15), however, may indicate otherwise. That in fact, those children who are not provided with BLA support in the home language are advantaged, because in not being able to rely on support they actively seek out other opportunities to learn, both from teachers and peers.

All schools set out to establish and develop strong links with parents, and acted in response to perceived individual and local need. This was based on the underlying recognition that parents are the first educators in children's lives, which is now firmly enshrined into practice through existing government policy such as the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2003) and the Every Parent Matters agenda (DfES, 2007). The role of BLAs became significant as part of communicating with parents, particularly in those schools with a high percentage of EALs, where they were required to act as translators between parents and staff, whilst in the first instance this removed the language barrier its continued use throughout early years eventually became a barrier in itself, to successful direct two-way communication.

By the end of KS1 children across all schools were in the majority, achieving the expected level 2 for speaking and listening. This showed significant improvement for schools 4 and 5, which may suggest that once EAL children begin to develop confidence in their use of English the rate of development continues. It is clear that these children already know what language is, they are merely now discovering what the English language is (Tabors, 2004). What was common across all schools, was the practice from all staff of using English at all times, since they are concerned with the quantity, and quality of exposure of the language. They are to some extent also under pressure from parents, and head teachers for children to be making observable and quantifiable progress.

Whilst oracy is the basis for all language development it is not unsurprising then that children in all settings perform better in the speaking and listening elements of the curriculum. In terms of the results for all components of English those schools with better outcomes appear to have some aspects in common; a higher number of children in the group who are native English speakers, a creative approach to literacy, and a higher percentage of parents who can support their children at home. Kabuto (2011) discusses the need for children to develop language practices at home, such as understanding that graphic forms carry meaning. Where the home language is merely used in a spoken form there is no encouragement for this to happen. Likewise where parents do not read/have low levels of literacy there are few opportunities if any, for children to develop this skill either. Parental education has been identified as strong indicator in determining how well a child's potential may be released in adult life (Fields, 2010). Evidence drawn from the parent focus group shows that all parents, regardless of their own literacy skills, are keen for their children to become proficient in their use of English.

What has become apparent from the study, is that those families living in English-dominant communities feel that learning to read, write and speak in English is necessary for school and future economic stability, there is not the same 'necessity' shown from those living in EAL-dominant communities. (The same findings are revealed in Martinez-Roldan and Malave, 2004). An interesting point discussed by Billet et al (2003) suggests there may be a link between starting to learn an additional language at an early age and a perceived weakening of national identity. Similar comments emerge from those parents from Moslem cultures who regard the maintenance of their home language inextricably linked to their religious identity. Interestingly too, is the view that whilst parents and home remain important influences throughout childhood, it is the influence of friends and peers, school, and the wider community that becomes of increasing significance as a child grows older (Sutton et al, 2004). For children then who live in homes, and communities where English is an additional language (as in school 4 and 5) and, where it is possible to continue without this, there is perhaps less motivation and encouragement to do so. The influence then, of the school may be seen to be at a tangent to the other dominant influences of

friends, peers and the wider community. The study clearly identified that all settings worked competently within the guidelines of the EYFS and National Curriculum, with individual setting also incorporating various strategies aimed at promoting literacy. However, throughout such current guidance is the assumption that EAL children are the minority within any group, and as such have the opportunity to hear and use English amongst their peers. The research (to date) has been unable to identify any guidance that adopts the opposite approach, that of, supporting groups of children where EAL is the majority or, as with those cohorts identified in the study which consist entirely of EAL children. For staff working in such settings then there is no specific guidance available.

In conclusion, one main theme to emerge is the extent to which creative resources and activities are used to underpin literacy. There is a clear link identified between a creative approach and levels of attainment; where creativity is increased attainment levels are higher. The quality of professional working relationships between staff is identified as important, since this clearly sets the tone for co-operation and learning in the classroom. The issue of working in partnership with parents is clearly high on the agenda for teaching staff who understand how this strengthens children's learning. It is therefore a matter of concern where this is difficult to establish, yet alone maintain. One very clear aspect that emerges from the study is the difference between schools, and, therefore the educational experiences of children. Children (as in schools 4 and 5) who are taught in a cohort of 100% EAL speakers who are from the same heritage background, have a very different experience to those in schools (as in schools 1, 2 and 3) where cohorts consists of diverse cultures and languages. It has to be argued that this cannot be viewed to be the 'multicultural' face of education though it is often presented to be so. Children in some settings are not being allowed to develop social interaction in its fullest sense and the process of enculturation is sadly lacking. Such educational experiences actually work against a secure sense of identity, do not encourage a clear understanding of the host nation, and culture, militate against social integration and hinder the process of second language development. If this stance appears overly critical, then it should be viewed in the wider context of British education which would define itself, as having an approach, which regards all children as those who matter (DfES, 2003).

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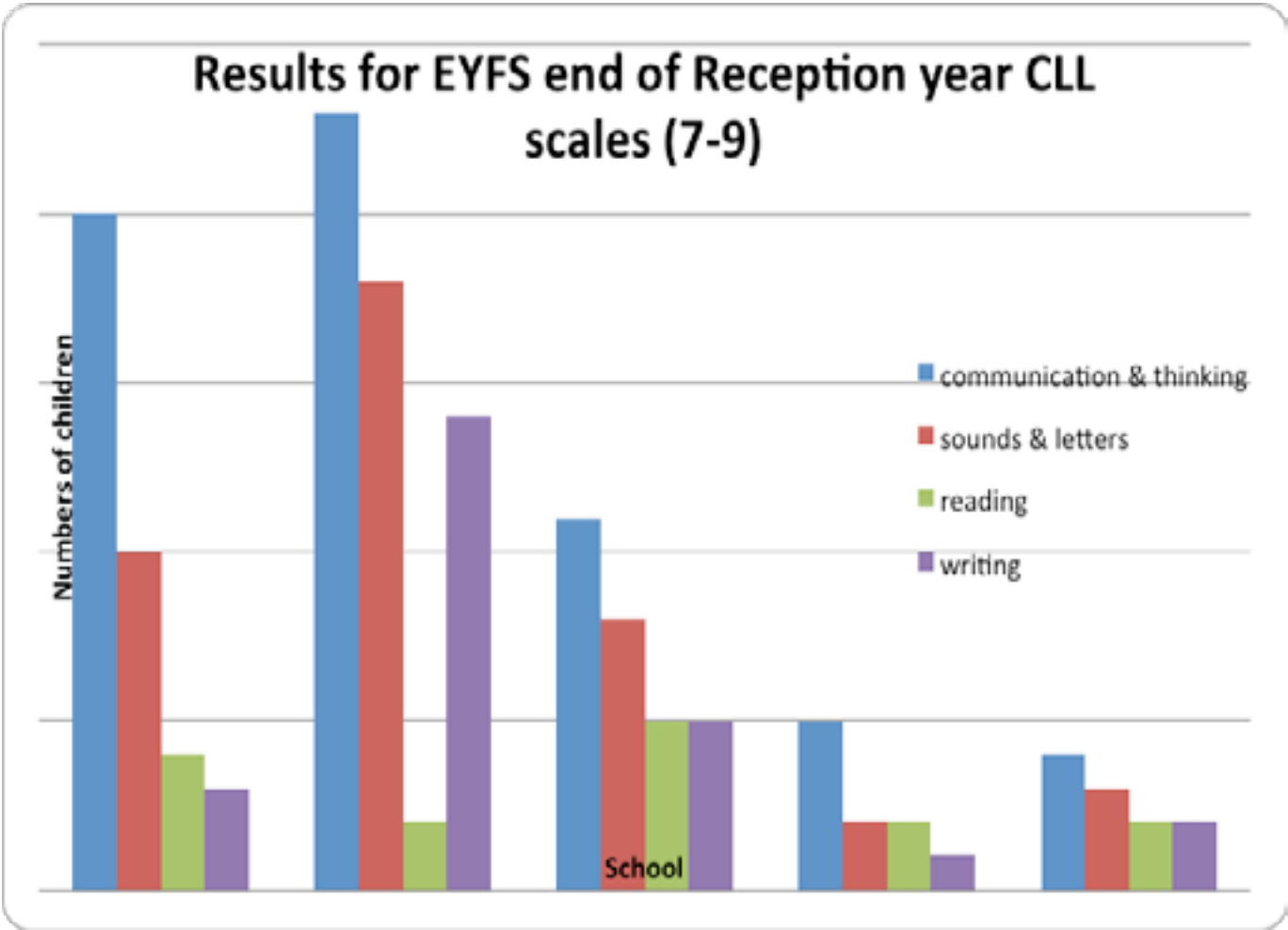
Tables

Table 1: Description of individual schools

School	Description	Class size	Number of children with English as LI	Number of EAL children	Majority language/s
1	Large faith school in town centre location. Large numbers of travellers, refugees, asylum seekers, and economic migrants.	35	15	20	Urdu, Bengali, Portuguese, Farsi, Serbian, Polish, Romanian
2	Newly built community school co-located with a nursery for under 3s and a Sure Start Centre. Central to a large council estate with high levels of unemployment.	30	7	23	Urdu, Bengali, Hindi,Farsi, Polish, Romanian
3	Small CofE school in catchment area of newly built private housing amid open countryside. Many parents are professionals.	32	12	20	Urdu, Bengali, Hindi, Syletti, Croatian, Farsi
4	Large dual-form entry, old Victorian building set in rows of old terraced houses. Central to large SE Asian community.	36	0	36	Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali
5	Very large Victorian building kerb-side to main road. Located central to area deemed to be of social deprivation. Local population is entirely SE Asian.	30	0	30	Urdu

Tables

Table 2. Results for CLL for all schools at the end of reception



Tables

Table 3: Overall levels of attainment for English for all school at the end of KS1

